

Russell Sackett

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Watergate: Raising the 'Scandal Threshold'

It is no easy exercise, these Watergate-saturated days, to recall an era so innocent that the headlines were dominated, for days on end, by several dozen West Point cadets caught cheating on exams. But newspaper morgues clearly attest that this was one of the most serious things going on in the early years of the Eisenhower administration.

Today, by contrast, it is hard to hit Page 1 with anything short of apocalypse, unless it relates to Watergate.

Some of the weightiest stories of the past year have broken in the last two months. Yet it is a major feat of gamesmanship to recall any of them, other than Watergate, in detail. They have been shaded, if not obliterated, by this preemptive No. 1 scandal.

The collapse of Equity Funding Corporation, for example, unearthed the sale of more than \$2 billion in fraudulent insurance policies—the outright manufacture, from nothing but creative paperwork and computer programming, of “assets” in excess of \$120 million that simply did not exist. Yet this, surely one of the major financial exposes in U.S. history, is familiar to few who, are not regular readers of *The Wall Street Journal*. Elsewhere, measured against Watergate, it just didn't stack up.

The classic big-city Democratic machine of Richard J. Daley, Chicago's mayor, and the reform Republican organization of New Jersey Gov. Thomas Cahill, have been discredited, perhaps fatally, by recent disclosures of fiscal scandal. Both stories have strong national implications, yet neither has been regularly covered outside the areas immediately involved. Who has the time?

The New York Times broke a story

last month concerning a quiet but shocking arrangement between U.S. and Mexican authorities whereby Mexican aliens arrested in this country have been hoodwinked by the thousands into buying their own passage back to Mexico, where they are dumped, to find their way back to the United States. The disclosure has dramatically shaken the Mexican government, where Watergate commands only passing interest. But it was barely picked up by other media in the United States, and to date only sparingly followed up by *The Times* itself.

Back in a relatively untroubled January, a great deal of the suspense on Capitol Hill was attributable to the

Mr. Sackett is a staff writer for Newsday.

forthcoming memoirs of hyperactive woman-about-Washington, Barbara Howar, purporting to run down the principals in many prominent amorous alliances, including her own. Howar's book, “Laughing All the Way,” is out now (and, incidentally, a best seller), and it has caused scarcely a nervous hiccup; there is gamier stuff to gossip about. When the author makes promotional appearances these days, many of the questions asked are not about the book, but about Watergate, which is hardly her field.

Smart public relations experts and criminal defense attorneys—those who are not representing Watergate clients—are not blind to the implications of the Watergate-engendered blackout of “other” news.

These days anyone who is guilty of a major non-Watergate-connected fed-

eral crime is well-advised to proceed to the nearest prosecutor's office and “cop out”—plead guilty in return for a reduced charge. Why? Because everyone is looking the other way.

Thanks to Watergate, routing scandalous behavior, whether major or just titillating, can now be surfaced at minimum risk of arousing the neighbors or disgracing immediate families. In a Watergated milieu, it may never reach public attention or, if it does, the public may be too diverted otherwise even to care.

There was, incidentally, another cheating scandal, described as the “most serious in 20 years,” discovered at the U.S. Military Academy a few weeks back. It is a mark of this cynical year that few took note of it, and fewer still seemed remotely scandalized.

Cribbing on exams these days, observed a West Point graduate of a more guileless generation, should be classed as a phase of survival training.

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